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Human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms

Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The General Assembly in its resolution 56/230 of 24 December 2001 requested the Secretary General to submit to it at its fifty-seventh session a report on the measures taken by the Secretariat, especially through the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, to enable the Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa, based in Yaoundé, to function efficiently and smoothly.

The first objective of this report is to give an account of action taken by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner and other relevant bodies of the Secretariat with a view to building the capacities of the Centre. The second objective is to give an overview of the activities carried out by the Centre from September 2001 to June 2002, in particular with the provision of such support by Secretariat bodies.

* A/57/150.
** The present report was submitted beyond the deadline so as to include updated information.

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I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, particularly in resolution 54/55 of 1 December 1999, requested the Secretary General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights to provide assistance for the establishment of the Centre. For that purpose, the Assembly allocated an amount of $1,000,000 for the biennium 2000-2001. Thanks to this initial allocation, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in cooperation with the Department of Political Affairs and with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), took concrete measures that enabled the Centre to begin operations in March 2001. This report covers the activities carried out by the Centre until June 2002.

II. Support for building the capacities of the Centre

2. Support was provided by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and other Secretariat bodies in various forms. It consisted in providing personnel, contributing to the continuing training of local staff, raising extrabudgetary funds, providing documentation, assisting the development of electronic means of communication and conducting advocacy activities to promote the Centre.

A. Provision of headquarters personnel to the Centre

3. In order to make legal and practical arrangements for the establishment of the Centre, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights seconded a Director to the Centre and is currently seconding a programme officer on democracy and a human rights specialist.

4. The Headquarters Agreement between the Government of Cameroon and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in respect of the Centre was signed on 12 September 2001. The drafts of other legal texts have already been drawn up as well and will be signed in the next few months. They include in particular the draft memorandum of agreement between the Office of the High Commissioner and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), whose members also participate in the Advisory Committee that led to the establishment of the Centre.

B. Continuing training of the Centre's local staff

5. The documentation and information unit is the Centre's basic tool for publicizing and promoting human rights and democratic principles and ideals. In order to develop the capacities of the staff assigned to the unit to enable them to meet the expectations of the general public, the Office of the High Commissioner made the necessary arrangements to send the documentalist in charge of the unit for training. She thus attended an advanced training course from 25 February to 8 March 2002. The course allowed her to enhance her skills in processing documents on human rights and democracy in general and United Nations publications in these particular areas. She also had technical meetings with the Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems, International (HURIDOCS), a non-

governmental organization specializing in the management and processing of human rights information.

C. Provision of documentation to the Centre

6. The publication and documents distribution services of the Office of the High Commissioner have, on a regular basis, supplied documents, booklets and publications on human rights, democracy and other related areas of activity of the United Nations (peace and security, humanitarian affairs and sustainable human development) to the Centre's documentation and information unit. From its opening in November 2001 to June 2002, the unit thus received 3,175 volumes in the various forms mentioned above. This enabled it in particular to distribute human rights fact sheets to interested persons and to participants in the Centre's training meetings and workshops. The Centre also acquired, by purchase or subscription, publications and periodicals for its documentation and information unit, through the competent services of the United Nations Office at Geneva and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

D. Development of the Centre's electronic means of communication

7. With the assistance of the analysis and information unit of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and with the technical support of the UNDP Office in Cameroon (V-SAT system) and the Subregional Development Centre for Central Africa of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the Centre completed the installation of its web site, which became operational on the day of its official inauguration, 13 June 2002. In particular, the site enables the Centre to ensure a broader dissemination of information on its activities and programmes and of its *Human Rights and Democracy Bulletin*, which is now published on the site. It also reduces the publication cost of the *Bulletin* by bringing the print run down from 2,000 to 1,000 copies.

III. Activities carried out by the Centre from September 2001 to June 2002

8. The activities carried out by the Centre in the period covered by this report concerned training, technical cooperation, public information, development of partnerships for human rights promotion, and various activities related to the commemoration of the first anniversary of the actual launching of the Centre and its official inauguration.

A. Training activities

1. Subregional workshops

9. The Centre's training activities include the organization of workshops, conferences or consultations of a subregional character on the Centre's priority themes: human rights; efforts to combat discriminatory measures and practices; human rights aspects of the administration of justice; human rights education;

economic, social and cultural rights; the right to development; the rights of women, children, the elderly, the disabled, and "marginalized" population groups; and, with regard to democracy, the electoral process, political parties, traditional conflict resolution procedures and good governance. These subregional workshops, conferences and consultations afford (governmental and non-governmental) participants an opportunity to familiarize themselves with established principles and practices in each field, exchange experiences by reporting on various national undertakings, with emphasis on best or good practices, and adopt recommendations on activities to be undertaken at the subregional, national and local levels.

10. In this context, the Centre organized a subregional workshop on the development of national action plans on human rights in Central Africa at Yaoundé on 18 and 19 December 2001. Government delegates and representatives of national institutions and non-governmental organizations from Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda and Sao Tome and Principe, as well as officials of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA), the United Nations Observer Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) and the offices of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, participated in the workshop. They adopted guidelines on the drafting and implementation of action plans on human rights in Central Africa.

11. On 13 and 14 June 2002, in connection with its official inauguration, the Centre organized a subregional conference reporting under international instruments. The conference was intended for ministers of justice and human rights and presidents of the supreme courts of the countries of Central Africa. The participants represented the following countries: Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Republic of the Congo and Sao Tome and Principe. BONUCA, the UNDP office in the Republic of the Congo, and the offices of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Burundi and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo were also represented. The conference was introduced by an expert from the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and by a Cameroonian official who had participated in several of his country's delegations when it had reported, in particular to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. The Centre's two consultants thus described their experience of this issue from the standpoint of a Committee examining States' reports and from the standpoint of a reporting State. National reports submitted by the participants shed light on the progress achieved by certain States in this area but also, especially, on the difficulties encountered and the need to strengthen national capacities. The declaration adopted on this occasion contained a number of recommendations, in particular to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and to the Centre, regarding the provision of technical assistance (training, advisory services and documentation) to requesting States.

2. Continuing training scholarship programme

12. The Centre began implementing its human rights continuing training scholarship programme in November 2001. This programme, open to deserving advanced students and young practitioners from the countries of Central Africa specializing in the areas of human rights and democracy, aims:

(a) To enhance trainees' practical knowledge of human rights and democracy issues and to initiate them into the techniques and methods of managing cases related thereto, in the light of the principles and practices of the bodies of the United Nations Secretariat;

(b) To build the capacities of the States of the subregion to manage issues relating to human rights and democracy.

13. As part of this last mission, the Centre plans to develop a data collection programme on the subregion's existing capacities in these areas. Under the plan, persons trained by the Centre will be listed, along with other competent persons, in a register that will be kept at the Centre and disseminated for possible use among government services, United Nations agencies and other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

14. This year, the Centre will receive eight trainees. In selecting the candidates, the Centre gives due consideration to the requirements of equitable geographical representation of the countries of the subregion and of each gender. Regulations were adopted and an application form was drawn up for the training courses. To ensure wider dissemination, these two documents were published in the Centre's *Human Rights and Democracy Bulletin* and posted on its web site.

B. Technical cooperation activities

15. In the framework of its technical cooperation programme to build national capacities in the areas of human rights and democracy, the Centre provides support to governments, national institutions and non-governmental organizations at their request.

16. Accordingly, in response to a request from the Government of Cameroon, the Centre continued to provide technical assistance to build the capacities of Cameroon's National Committee for Human Rights and Freedoms.

17. The Centre also received requests for technical assistance from the Government of Equatorial Guinea in March 2002 and from the Government of Chad in May 2002.

18. The Centre's support for civil society is expected to begin in the second half of 2002. The Centre has formulated a capacity-building project for civil society organizations in Central Africa. This three-year project, currently with the competent bodies of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for examination and approval, should enable the Centre to carry out the following activities in particular:

(a) Organization of four subregional seminars for civil society stakeholders;

(b) Award of 10 scholarships for excellence to eminent members of civil society;

(c) Support for the institutional development of federations or groupings of civil society organizations in areas of particular interest to the Centre;

(d) Reception and training of thirty trainees from Central Africa countries at the Centre;

(e) Provision of support for human rights education and research institutions.

C. Public information

19. In order to carry out its programme to publicize human rights and democratic rules and values, the Centre has two permanent tools. The first is its documentation and information unit, which provides services to the public and has developed an electronic dissemination programme. The second is the *Human Rights and Democracy Bulletin*, the Centre's newsletter on its activities and facts of special interest to the subregion in the areas of human rights and democracy. Published every four months as from January 2002, after having been published on a quarterly basis in 2001, the *Bulletin* is distributed free of charge and is now available on the Centre's web site.

20. In addition, the Centre decided to publish on an annual basis the proceedings of its workshops, conferences and consultations with a view to their broad distribution. The first collection of proceedings is currently being prepared for publication. It will contain the proceedings of workshops, conferences and consultations organized by the Centre from March 2001 to June 2002.

D. Development of partnerships

21. In accordance with the recommendations on the integration of human rights into all United Nations activities and thanks to the coordination mechanisms operating locally in the countries within its remit and to the various agreements signed by the Office of the High Commissioner with other agencies of the United Nations system, the Centre is developing partnerships with relevant organizations operating in the subregion. In this context, mention must be made of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Subregional Office in Central Africa, headquartered in Yaoundé (projects relating to trafficking in children, to migrants and to pygmies), the Regional Office of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), headquartered in Kigali (project relating to acts of violence against women), UNESCO (development of national action plans), the Economic Commission for Africa Central African Subregional Development Centre (building civil society capacities), the various UNDP offices (human rights dimension of the Common Country Assessment (CCA) and United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) process and efforts to integrate human rights and good governance into the implementation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development).

22. There are plans for closer partnership with the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and its subsidiary bodies, in particular the Council for Peace and Security in Central Africa, the Multinational Force for Central Africa and the Early-Warning Mechanism for Central Africa. The imminent signature of a memorandum of agreement between the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the ECCAS secretariat should enable the Centre to develop activities for the integration of human rights into the programmes of these mechanisms in keeping with the spirit of the Yaoundé Declaration, which recommended its creation.

23. Lastly, the Centre has already established preliminary contacts with training and research institutions in the areas of human rights and democracy in Central Africa. In such contacts, the Centre gives priority to institutions of a subregional character, those with programmes of proven subregional impact and networked institutions or programmes. Since September 2001, the Centre has established contacts with the directors of the International Relations Institute of Cameroon, the Catholic University of Central Africa (through the Association for the Promotion of Human Rights), the UNESCO Chair for a Culture of Peace, Conflicts Resolution, Human Rights, Democracy and Good Governance at the University of Kinshasa and the network of human rights and democracy education and training programmes of Central Africa. There are plans for the Centre to support, with the two last institutions mentioned above, the establishment of focal points, particularly in Yaoundé, Kinshasa and Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Centre's support for education programmes in Central Africa will comprise the provision of documentation, funding for training missions by human rights experts and the award of scholarships to young researchers and assistants seconded to these programmes to enable them to participate in training organized by internationally renowned institutions. Lastly, staff from the Centre will take part, as resource persons, in training organized under the programmes.

E. Miscellaneous activities

1. Commemoration of the first anniversary of the inception of the Centre's operations

24. On 22 March 2002, the Centre organized a conference to commemorate the first anniversary of the inception of its operations. The conference consisted of a round table on the theme "For a new culture of human rights and democracy in Central Africa". Many participants, representing in particular diplomatic missions, United Nations agencies and civil society organizations, participated in a half day's discussion on the following aspects of human rights: justice administration and human rights; human rights education and training of trainers; human rights of members of high-risk groups, especially refugees and displaced persons; and building the capacities of civil society organizations, support of national human rights institutions by the Centre and integration of human rights into ECCAS activities and programmes. The participants formulated concrete recommendations, to be implemented by the Centre, on each of the issues discussed at the conference.

2. Official inauguration of the Centre

25. The Centre was inaugurated officially by the High Commissioner for Human Rights on 13 June 2002 in the presence of ministerial delegations from 10 Central African member States of ECCAS and the Secretary General of that organization. The ceremony was also attended by many ambassadors accredited to Yaoundé, heads of United Nations agencies and representatives of civil society organizations and of the population. On that occasion, speeches were made, in the following order, by the Director of the Centre, the ECCAS Secretary General, the representative of the UNDP Administrator, the personal representative of the President of the French Republic, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Minister of State responsible for External Relations of Cameroon. All speakers stressed the close, interactive and dynamic linkages that existed between, on the one hand, human

rights and democracy and, on the other hand, peace and development. Accordingly, they emphasized the special role that the Centre had to play to promote sustainable peace and development in Central Africa.

26. The High Commissioner for Human Rights used the opportunity to hold discussions with a number of ministers and presidents of supreme courts who attended the inauguration ceremony and the subregional conference organized by the Centre on that occasion. She also visited the headquarters of Cameroon's National Committee for Human Rights and Freedoms and, after the visit, held talks with the members of the Committee and representatives of civil society organizations. In addition, she suggested, and they concurred, that two high-level advisory bodies should be created for the Centre and, on her return to Geneva, she instructed the administrative services of her Office to expedite the deployment of the professional staff who were to be assigned to the Centre.